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Is it a Cold, the Flu or Anthrax?

What are the symptoms of a cold?

If you have a cold you can have any or all of these symptoms: increased nasal discharge (a runny nose), difficulty breathing through your nose, sneezing, a sore throat, and a cough. Your ability to taste and to smell may be affected, you may have a hoarse voice, and your voice often develops a nasal quality. Adults may have a mild fever, while infants and young children may develop a higher fever. The symptoms of the average cold last about one week but, in roughly one out of every four cases, the illness lasts up to two weeks. In general, cold symptoms, especially the cough, tend to be worse in people who smoke.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Influenza symptoms, often called the Flu, are often more severe than cold symptoms. If you have influenza you can have any or all of these symptoms: fever, muscle aches, a headache, lack of energy, a dry cough, sore throat, and sometimes a runny nose. These symptoms usually last for one week for most people; however, for some they can last as long as two weeks. People with lung disease, a weakened immune system, and people over 65 years of age are prone to severe and possibly fatal complications from influenza. These are people who should get an influenza vaccination each year.

What are the symptoms of the inhalation form of anthrax?

Naturally occurring anthrax is extremely rare in the United States. The first symptoms of the inhalation (breathing) form of anthrax are mild, not specific and may include fever, body aches and mild cough and possibly chest pain. Increased nasal discharge (a runny nose) is not usually seen in the inhalation form of anthrax. After several days there may be improvement of symptoms. Then symptoms quickly progress to severe breathing difficulties and shock.

How do I know that my cold or flu symptoms are not caused by the inhalation form of anthrax?

Many illnesses begin with symptoms commonly referred to as "flu-like" symptoms. These include fever, lack of energy, and muscle aches. The inhalation form of anthrax would quickly be distinguished from a cold or flu by the rapid development of severe symptoms that would require hospitalization.

If I have cold or flu symptoms, when should I call my doctor?

If you have a cold you will get better, with or without medication, in about a week. Occasionally, the cold viruses can affect the lining of the upper respiratory system in a way that leads to other infections, such as sinusitis, ear infections or bronchitis.

The most serious complication of influenza is pneumonia, which is an infection of the lungs. The influenza virus can cause pneumonia itself, or bacteria may enter the lungs after the body's natural defenses have been weakened by the flu.

Patients with cold or flu symptoms should consult a physician for any of the following symptoms, which may indicate more severe illness:

- High fever
- Severe headache
- Shortness of breath
- Delirium
- Chest pain
- Extreme weakness or dizziness
- Sinus pain or toothache
- Ear pain
- Worsening cough

Should I get an influenza immunization (flu shot) so that if I get flu-like symptoms I will know I don't have influenza?

No. Influenza vaccination should not be considered as a way to avoid confusing influenza disease with suspected anthrax illness for several reasons.

- Symptoms such as fever, body aches, and headaches are common to many different infections, besides influenza and anthrax. Most such illnesses are not caused by influenza (or anthrax) and influenza vaccination will not prevent these diseases.
- Influenza vaccine is not 100% protective and some people who have been vaccinated will still develop influenza.
- Influenza vaccine supplies available during October should be first be targeted to people with certain chronic medical conditions and the elderly who are at high risk for developing serious complications from influenza. In November, influenza vaccine will be made to others wishing to be immunized.

Patients with "flu-like" symptoms should also be aware that:

- There is no screening test available for the detection of anthrax disease in asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic persons.
- Nasal swabs have been used for epidemiologic purposes in the setting of a confirmed case of anthrax. Nasal swabs are not used to diagnose anthrax infection in a person.